

THE CASE OF THE MURDERED MONKS

This is possibly the first time that the *Journal of the Pali Text Society* has been offered material with a title so sensational as to suggest one of the more luridly covered paperbacks ! Still, the subject-matter to be examined here, a really mysterious case, does occur in the pages of the Vinaya-piṭaka, being found there as the principal story of the third *pārājika* (defeat). In this paper it is intended to summarize the story, to look into the Vinaya Commentary's elaborations, to compare these matters with the account in the Dharmagupta Vinaya and finally to comment on the issues raised.

The Mahāvibhaṅga (Vin III 68 foll.) tells a very strange story. At that time, it relates, the Buddha was instructing the monks in the practice of the unattractiveness of the body (*asubhabhāvanā*). When he had completed this he undertook a fortnight's retreat, seeing no-one except the monk who brought him almsfood. As the monks practised *asubha* it seems that self-hatred arose very strongly in them, for they came to loathe their bodies, rather than seeing them dispassionately as impure. Some committed suicide, while others took the lives of their fellow monks, apparently making pacts: "I'll kill you, you kill me". Some went to a hanger-on of the monastery, a man called Migalaṇḍika who had a yellow robe and pretended to be a monk, and asked him to take their lives. He did this 'service' in exchange for the dead monks' robes and bowls. Afterwards he took his blood-stained knife down to the river Vaggumudā to wash it there. Then he repented of his violence, thinking that he had deprived many virtuous monks of life. At this point he experienced some sort of vision and it is hard to decide whether this 'being' was something external to him, or an aspect of his own mind. In any case, the '*devatā*' told him that he had done good in bringing across, or as we should say 'saving', those who were not yet across, had not yet attained Nibbāna. After this he was convinced that what he had done was good, and consequently he returned to the monastery, where he

went from one building to another crying out, “Who has not crossed ? Whom do I bring across ?” (Vin III 69,10–11). We are told that in this way he ‘brought across’ as many as sixty monks in a day; that is, he murdered them.

At the end of his retreat the Buddha noticed that the number of monks had decreased and asked Ānanda the reason for this. When he was informed of what had happened he called a saṅgha-meeting, at first saying nothing of the recent spate of killings but instructing the remaining monks in mindfulness of breathing (*ānāpānasati*). His disapproval is only expressed with a stock passage recurring frequently in the Vinaya, “It is not proper, it is not seemly ... this is not for the benefit of unbelievers”; after which he is shown as laying down the basic rule. We find this an incredible account of what actually took place, as the Buddha does not allude to the doings of Migalaṇḍika or even forbid suicide. Only at a later time is he depicted as doing so.

Turning now to the Commentary (Sp 393–479) for some light upon these strange events, we are treated to elaborations of the *asubha*-practice followed by some comments on the story. We are informed that, for reasons obvious below, *no-one*, apart from the monk appointed, could interrupt the Buddha’s retreat.

At this point the Commentary tells a story of the past to try to account for the terrible Vinaya tale of wholesale suicide and murder. This woefully inadequate story concerns a group of 500 hunters who had killed deer in their past lives and later, in the one then current, had been ordained, still without having exhausted the fruits of their evil *kamma*. Due to this they killed themselves and other monks, but apparently only those of their own group. The Commentary points out that among them many were noble (*ariya*) while some were ordinary (*puthujjana*). It is implied that the latter would reach a path/fruit through meditation on *asubha*, while of course the future of the former was in no doubt. What

an extraordinary story ! Does this mean that those ennobled by the Dhamma went around killing other monks ? It is rare in the Suttas to find even examples of monks who took their own lives in the last stages of terminal illness, when as Arahants they were not to be blamed; what is to be said of monks killing others ! The Commentator then attributes some improbable thoughts to the Buddha: he says to himself, “I am not able to save them with my divine power. I am of no use to them”. The Commentator grapples with the dilemma of proclaiming the Buddha omniscient on the one hand (as all Commentaries claim in opposition to the Buddha’s own words [M I 482,14–18]), while showing him doing nothing to stop his monks committing suicide and murder on the other. The explanation offered is that the Buddha was in *jhāna* and that no-one could talk to him. This conflicts with the Vinaya text which mentions that one monk took him almsfood every day.

After commenting on Migalaṇḍika, of whom it is said that he went to the river not only to wash his knife but also to purify himself of evil *kamma*, the Commentator arrives at another difficult point: explaining why the Buddha asked Ānanda where the monks had gone. If he was omniscient he knew already; if not, then he would be like ordinary people who need to ask. This issue is resolved by implying that the Buddha had been playing around: though he knew, still he asked as though he did not know. Such complications always follow from claims to omniscience when this is defined as knowing everything all at once. There is some gentle mockery of the Jain teacher’s claims to omniscience at M II 214.

The Dharmagupta Vinaya story agrees essentially with the Pāli account. It makes much of the kammic retribution that had to fall on the 500 former hunters, by then monks, who would be forced to slaughter one another. Other Vinayas may throw more light upon this incident. As it stands, the Pāli account presents us with insoluble problems which are not in any way solved by the Commentary:

1. The Buddha knew others' minds, so why did he teach *asubha* meditation if this was likely to lead to suicide and murder ?
2. Presumably he knew of the murderous potential of Migalaṇḍika, but is shown as going into retreat.
3. No monks, not even Ānanda, did anything to prevent the massacre. Even his attendant monk apparently did not say to the Buddha that monks were being slain or killing themselves in large numbers.
4. Nothing was done to restrain Migalaṇḍika, though these events are said to have taken place not far from the city of Vesālī, from which help could easily have been obtained.
5. The Buddha, apparently not knowing of the carnage during his retreat, asks, "Where have the monks gone ?" when he emerges from it.

When reviewed like this the whole story appears a piece of improbable fiction, possibly a very distorted account of something which actually did take place. It is strange that a story like this, which does no credit to the Buddha, but quite the opposite, was permitted to remain in the Vinaya. Maybe some exceedingly dark events really did take place and had to be explained away, though the existing account is not successful in doing so. If the story is partly true, it would hardly reflect well on the Buddha, while if the whole is true he appears in a worse light still. As a Buddhist I am naturally reluctant to accept this.

The *Bhikshuni Precepts Manual* of the Dharmagupta Vinaya recounts almost the same story. Here is its account of the monastery at that time: "Due to these circumstances, the grove became littered with corpses. It stank horribly and was in a state of utter chaos and resembled a graveyard. The laity were shocked. They said, 'If these *bhikṣus* would

go so far as to kill one another, how much more would they take the lives of other people ! We should not make offerings to them any more.'"

It is unlikely that the mystery underlying this Vinaya rule will ever be solved, though other accounts surviving in the various untranslated Vinayas may be of some help. Obviously, the curious account in Pāli does not present the whole picture. Besides this, one must allow for exaggeration, especially of the number of monks killed by Migalaṇḍika: if the Vinaya text is taken literally he killed 265 over several days. The Commentary, more expansive, tells us 500 monks died, but then this is a standard figure for a large number in Pāli.

In this initial exploration of the case we have not been able to offer a satisfactory solution. Perhaps later investigators with more information at their disposal may be able to 'solve' this mystery, or if they cannot do this, they may at least make more probable guesses at what happened to those monks outside Vesālī.

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